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News Release

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Reservoirs help in dry times, but only rain cures drought!

Many people see reservoirs as having just one purpose—the one that interests them most closely. In fact, reservoirs fulfill many missions. Some of our reservoirs were built with flood control in mind, or water supply, or hydropower production. Most also offer recreational resources, help to improve water quality in their watersheds, and support or enhance wildlife and aquatic life.

Today, our reservoirs are helping us to minimize the effects of an enduring drought. How do they help? By giving us a reserve supply of water that communities can continue to use for water supply, by allowing us to continue sending water downstream to improve water quality, by helping us to keep on generating power during the hot summer months.

With so many needs to meet, those who manage reservoirs often find that a variety of constituencies are competing for water resources, or in conflict about how they should be managed. Conflicts usually arise at times when there is too much water or too little.

Right now, we have a drought, and that sets up some competing needs. For example, people who live around the lake want it to stay full, and keep their boat docks and watercraft afloat. Marina Operators and others whose recreation-based businesses depend on a lake filled with blue water start feeling an economic pinch if the lake falls. Municipalities want to keep drawing water out so that people can shower, wash dishes and clothes, maintain their carwash or plant nursery businesses. Those who use the lake for hydropower want to keep water flowing out of the lake to run the generators. Industries need a good flow of fresh water to keep salt water from intruding into their factories. Environmentalists want to see water flowing down stream to dilute any pollutants in the stream, improve oxygen levels in the water, and prevent algae blooms and fish kills.

So how in the world do we balance all those competing needs? The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, recognized last year that three years of drought were about to stretch into four. Indeed, conditions are now the worst for this time of the year that we have seen in 114 years of meteorological records. In February of 2002, Wilmington District began meeting weekly with officials from the States of North Carolina and Virginia and other agencies and organizations that manage or are affected by water resource conditions.

Every Tuesday, the Drought Management Committee holds a telephone conference to share information. The National Weather Service, US Geological Survey, the Southeast Power Administration, North Carolina and Virginia climatologists, wildlife and fisheries resources officials, water resources division and water quality officials, municipal water authorities, industries and businesses all contribute. Together, participants learn how drought is affecting their colleagues. All use that information to better balance their management of scarce resources. For a city that might mean purchasing water from another source. For the state, it may mean reducing minimum flow requirements for water quality, for the Corps, it may mean changing the amount of water released from our dams or the amount of hydropower we generate. For parks and recreation facilities, it may mean curtailing use of swim beaches or boat ramps.

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Through the meetings, participants learn out just when lower water levels will begin to cause serious problems for communities, ecosystems, or industries. “We use the best information and science from every source to help us determine our project operations,” said Wilmington District Water Control Manager Terry Brown. “As the drought continues, that task becomes more and more difficult. We are most appreciative of the great efforts our stakeholders are making to conserve water, reduce demand, and frankly share the pain a drought imposes.”

Can our reservoirs take care of the drought? “Reservoirs can moderate the effects of a drought and keep us from emergency situations for an extended period of time. But only rain can cure a drought,” Brown said. “We need several months of above-average rainfalls to begin to replenish ground water, bring stream flows back to normal, and refill our reservoirs. In the meantime, we encourage everyone to conserve water. Obey mandatory use restrictions if you live in a community that has them. Even if your community is still ‘ok’ it’s a good idea to take steps to conserve water now. Climatologists don’t forsee any change in dry conditions until this winter. We have a long way to go!”

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